

You can't touch this: rules of engagement at work

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A kiss hello, a pat on the back or a crushing bear hug – all par for the course when greeting friends down at the local, but what about in the workplace?

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Where does the physical line between a warm greeting and inappropriate manhandling – or worse, sexual harassment – lie, and are more Australians becoming chary about crossing it?

Graham Sammells, the CEO of Melbourne technology consultancy IQ Group, takes care not to come close. He's a proponent of circumspect contact, rather than backslapping bonhomie, in the office.

“My first rule of thumb is to keep things gender neutral as much as possible,” Sammells says.

“That's a handshake to greet and leave, rather than a kiss. Outside of the meet-and-greet you need to respect people's personal space. I, for one, [am not] one to give kisses and hugs at work.”

He's not over-keen on receiving them either. While kissing hello may be the natural modus operandi for some tactile women, others use it as a tactic to disconcert the recipient, Sammells says.

Corporate etiquette consultant Clare Maxfield agrees kissing can be problematic. While a peck on the cheek may be acceptable to both parties if they know each other well, it can create awkwardness, if it occurs in a group setting.

“It's obvious you and they are on much closer terms than the rest ... a kiss takes it from professional to social and can make others uncomfortable,” Maxfield says.

A smile and a warm handshake is a better bet, she says: “Make sure it's dry and firm.”

Keeping a good arm's distance – 45 to 60cm – away from others once you've shaken is also advisable if you want to avoid getting a reputation for space invasion, Maxwell says.

Other physical contact is best kept to a minimum. Even a jovial slap on the back can be an exclusionary gesture. It's typically a man-to-man interaction and should be confined to the sports field or pub, unless you're prepared to give one to female colleagues too, Maxfield says.

Former Brumby's CEO and adjunct professor at the Griffith University Business School, Michael Sherlock, says he wouldn't.

Like Sammells, he believes workplace touching should be restricted to the handshake and would be loathe to pat an employee of either sex on the back.

Being senior in an organisation necessitates caution in dealings with others, Sherlock says – from not signing overly risqué birthday cards, to keeping your hands to yourself.

“You can behave in a certain way and not believe yourself to be offensive but one time in a thousand someone might take it the wrong way,” Sherlock says.

“You can modify your behaviour to be a bit impersonal and cold, or take the risk ... you never know when someone will turn on you and go and see a no-win, no-fee lawyer.”

Workplace equality notwithstanding, men remain considerably more concerned than women about the prospect of this occurring. Unsolicited hugs and pats that may be excused as touchy-feely behaviour from a female colleague can set alarm bells ringing if the instigator is male.

McCullough Robertson Lawyers workplace specialist Jeremy Kennedy believes high-profile sexual harassment lawsuits, such as that which terminated Mark McInnes' career as David Jones CEO in 2010, have made men more cautious.

Given the subjective nature of sexual harassment claims, being hands-offish makes sense, especially if you're in a position of authority, Kennedy says.

Inappropriate physical contact is in the eye of the recipient, not the perpetrator, and one person's friendly squeeze can become another's sexual harassment claim or even assault charge.

If you don't want a day in court but need to deflect unwelcome touch, humour can be an effective shield, The Good Manners Company founder Anna Musson says.

It's a better option than snapping at a colleague to keep their paws to themselves, however warranted it may be.

“Don't cause a scene – it can be more damaging to your professionalism than theirs,” Musson advises.

“It is possible the person is quite a 'touchy' type and doesn't mean any offence, in which case sometimes you just need to position yourself to avoid the touch, or grin and bear it, especially if they are senior to you in the workplace.

“If you are not playing along to ensure you reach your KPIs, a warm, 'if you touch me again I might go Mixed Martial Arts on you' will hopefully deter the offender without causing a scene.”

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